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The situative and the reactive

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This article's aim is to reconsider the concept of the situative [Situativen] as it is described by the German psychiatrist and phenomenologist Hubertus Tellenbach. The category of the situative is fundamental for the understanding of the psychology of the situation, and it is here conceptualized starting from the contribution of the European classical psychopathology, i.e. Jaspers, Minkowsky, Pauleikhoff, and Lange. The concepts of situative, situation, adjustment and reaction are here discussed. When bound in a certain axiological perspective, the limits of the situation in which the person is immerged make her unable to adjust to particular life conditions. Such dynamic spreads light on a phenomenological account of the vulnerability towards depression.

Keywords: situative, situation, adjustment, reaction, vulnerability, depression

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INTRODUCTION

The clinical tools of the phenomenologically oriented psychiatrist include a specific way to observe, continuously aimed at creating a meaningful connection between the phenomena, as they present themselves in psychopathology, and their supposed determinants. Arnaldo Ballerini (2002), the leading founder of the Italian Society for Phenomenological Psychopathology and of the new way to conceive the training in clinical phenomenology in Italy, was used to recall Minkowski's assertion that to know a phenomenon is to predetermine it. In accordance to these introductive notes, the works of Tellenbach achieve the aim of defining the profile of the premorbid personality of those subjects inclined to melancholy, i.e. the "real" depression.

In his main writing, "Melancholy" (1974/1975), he studies and describes the developmental pathway of the melancholic by analyzing the possible determinants of the genesis of melancholia, through the conception of connections between the person and the illness. He describes the pathogenetic changes along the transformation "endogenous-melancholic", and here we find a particular category: that of the situative (*Situativen*).

In psychopathology, the situative and the reactive usually characterize those events in which environmental conditions change and as a consequence the mind adjusts through modalities whose output is psychopathological.

We consider reactive a modality of response of the mind to a stimulus, while with the term situative we mean the way the mind predisposes itself to a particular scene. Or, better, how it disposes the scene according to some of its own fundamental premises.

Therefore, in the case of the reactive there is the adjustment of an organism, i.e. the mind system, while in the situative what is shown is the precondition to such adjustment. Seen from the perspective of the uncanny event, the latter will have a pathogenic effect depending on both its own objective power and the resilience capabilities of the subject. A potentially stressful life event can bother the melancholic but not the traumatized person when it is part of the category of the situative, while it will be the opposite if the event in question is involved in the reactivation of traumatic memories.

The correlated concepts of the situative and the situation can improve the understanding of man and the psychopathological phenomenon, as far as it offers a clear reminder to the importance of considering the Ego-world relationship, i.e. the way the individual constructs his own world, inhabits a place, is engaged in an event. The way

the individual makes the world the proper world and enacts ways of adaptive adjustment.

Accordingly, to link directly the life event to the consequent reaction can be an undue oversimplification. To aptly interpret the role of the phenomena predisposing to the depressive crisis, the psychopathogenic analysis of the coping activity of the individual has to be enriched by the introduction of the examination of the situation through the category of the situative.

In this article I will briefly review some key points of the concepts of *situative* and *reactive* as discussed in classical psychopathology.

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SITUATION

The concept of "situative" is borrowed from the famous treatise on "Melancholy" by Hubertus Tellenbach (1974/1975). The term situative derives from situation, common word in English that probably derives from medieval French. The English word "situation", whose etymology is Latin from *situs* (site), includes as its possible meanings the following: position, circumstance, state, condition, problem. The corresponding word in French has two main definitions (Cortellazzo & Zolli, 1999). The first dates back to 1375 and means "geographic position in a site"; the other one dates back to 1678 and refers to a "complex of circumstances". In these two connotations it is represented the double articulation that is still present in the current meaning of the word situation: that between site and circumstance, i.e. a whole of objective conditions, an ensemble of objective facts which contribute to definite actions or decisions.

Focusing now on the issue of the reactive, it generically refers to that condition in which, as in the adjustment reactions, the resulting disorder has a clear, evident, and somehow univocal, reactive genesis. I.e., it is secondary to the modality of reaction to the external event. The disorder is bonded to the existence of a trigger factor for its onset (its genesis) and its possible natural recovery. It is this specific dynamic that characterizes, in both pathogenetic and evolutional sense, the so-called Adjustment Disorders.

Since the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1994, 2013), they are included in the modern nosography starting from the concept of mental disorder and consequently of causal events. A mental disorder is defined as a clinically significant behavior or a psychological syndrome or the emergence of signs of stress, distress or disability; more, when there is risk of pain, death or disability. What matters is that the observed behavior has not to be conceived as a culturally accepted reaction to a given event.

The reactions to an event are considered for the diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder only when the mental disorder arises as an adjustment reaction to one or more psychosocial stressors. The causal link between event and disorder is bond to the temporal sequence, the length of time since the event occurred, the fact that the reaction is disproportionate and different from the reaction usually expected in a given social context; this should be excluded as a physiological reaction of loss.

The European psychopathology has studied the relationship between individual and environment and between adjustment and psychopathology since classic times.

In short, we shall at least remind the reader the contributions of authors like Jaspers and Minkowski, who wrote on this issue largely before Tellenbach.

Jaspers (1946/1963) discusses the concept of situation in the chapter of his *General Psychopathology* dedicated to the understandable relationships of the psychic life, where he considers the relationship between the individual and his world. There, the author puts the basis for a subjectivization of this concept. He will be criticized by Tellenbach, who was not persuaded by Jaspers' ambiguous definition of situation, swinging between situation as contingency external to the individual, and situation in which the individual has a role of responsibility.

Regarding the situation of the individual in the world, Jaspers (1946/1963, p.325) writes:

> "The basic human situation is that each one stands in the world as an individual, a finite being, dependent but always with a possibility for activity within certain changing but constricting bounds. Living is an encounter with a world which we call concrete reality"

Around the concepts of situation and reaction, Jaspers describes the experiences of adjustment to the environment as tasks which can be intended

differently by the subject, either grabbed or neglected. He writes (Jaspers, 1946/1963, p.325):

> "All life takes place in its own particular surroundings. In abstract physiological terms we say stimulus causes reaction. In real life, the situation releases activity, and gives birth to performance and experience; it may evoke them in some way or put them forward as something that has to be done"

And below he explains (Jaspers, 1946/1963, p.325) that:

> "The psychology of meaningful phenomena investigates individual attitudes to typical situations. It objectifies the way in which coincidence, opportunity and destiny come to us through the situation itself and how we grasp or lose them"

He also describes those events who have a potentially very significant effect in the adjustment situation, that he defines as "limit situations", which is the best translation for the concept that we will find in the following quote translated as "marginal situation" (Jaspers, 1946/1963, pp.325-326):

> We use the term 'marginal situations' for the ultimate situations like death, guilt, and inevitable struggle, which determine the whole of life unavoidably, although being hidden and unheeded in our everyday existence. The human experience, appropriation and conquest of these marginal situations remain the final sources of what we really are and of what we can become"

Related to the same topic of the limit situations is Minkowski's conceptualization of the "blows of fate". He tries to sketch a psychogenetic interpretation of madness, severing traumatic psychogenesis from conflict-based psychogenesis. In his Treatise of Psychopathology, we read (Minkowski, 1966/2015, p.26):

> "Madness entails the idea of an elective life conducing to it [madness]; first of all are the blows of destiny, which rage without mercy, shaking from the basis the life of the human being, obscuring his reason. […] In this way it seems that the way to what we now call psychogenesis has been arranged. However the emphasis goes on the "blows" of fate, that cannot be directly overlapped to the role that nowadays we impute to the conflicts of some mental disorders"

He then continues with the description of the atmospheric mood of the environment, where the objective and the subjective overlap; the place where a non-mediated contact of the perceptual activity is generated.

> "The environment envelops and penetrates, "touches" closely. The objective and the subjective are no more sharply divided, neither are the internal and the external. It does not entails perceptions at a distance, for the fact itself that it "touches" closely, as attested by the term "contact". It has to do with the living experience and the dynamic; it receives, "acclimatizes", embraces and if needed harbors or clashes" (Minkowski, 1966/2015, p.52)

The individual finds himself to be one with the environment, the individual is immersed within the environment and depends on it, even in the sense of deep intimacy. He "feels" it more than "knowing" it. Hence, the environment is more akin to the concept of "climate".

In "Melancholy", Tellenbach (1974/1975) describes the "situative" as a middle step that partly makes understandable the pathogenetic process he calls "endogenous-melancholic transformation". This transformation exemplifies the logical step from being "constitutionally" in a given way (*Typus*) to becoming ill (depression).

Tellenbach challenges the concept of "reactive" in the psychogenesis of depression, proposing a new way to conceive the genetic relationship between life events and pathologic response.

After that book, we can no longer speak of reaction for the pathogenetic development leading to depression (although psychologists and psychiatrists are often unaware of this). Starting from a negative event, for example a loss, it appears obvious the development of a depression as a reaction. However, the pathway is longer than this, because it is related to the perceived effect of destabilization of the Self, that Tellenbach calls "threat", operated by a change-entailing event. Accordingly, if intended as an univocal and direct connection between event and psychopathologic data, from the observer's external point of view, the concept of reaction loses its meaning and usability.

Using as a case in point a depression related to home moving, Tellenbach (1974/1975, p.178) states that "as a lived experience, this does not derive from what has been experienced". In this case, neither the doctor nor the patient are able to find a plausible motivation for the pre-melancholic demoralization. In this quote, we

see in short the distinction between the situative and the reactive. This is an example of the situative conditions, because it is the specific situation of inhabiting, strictly related to the issue of the order. Orderliness here constitutes an indispensable premise for the stability of the patient's identity. And when this stability is threatened by change, then the risk is the fall in the pre-psychotic experience prompted by the endokinetic process. Accordingly, the situation is configured as a specific state, which "is specific as far as it forces the melancholic to movements that his nature does not allow him to do" (Tellenbach, 1974/1975, p.172)

In Tellenbach the concept of the situative has to be linked to his discourse about the personality structure of the pre-melancholic person, which he thoroughly studies empirically and phenomenologically to characterize the Typus Melancholicus. What is highlighted here is an anthropological structure, a "constitutional" predisposition, a personality characterization that is so clear that it can be configured as a typology. The anthropological structure of the typus is so essential, so "rigid", that it largely influences the possibility to adapt to the environment and its changes.

This can be understood only in light of the category of the situative.

Tellenbach identifies "human" situations, that often precede the melancholic symptoms, that have a trigger or facilitating role condensed in the image of the threat. That is, some changes in the life of the pre-melancholic person acquire a role as threatening conditions because they disrupt an order which is essential for the identity stability of the subject. The development of the pathogenetic process, here called endokinetic or endogenous, that leads from the specific threat state to the depressive crisis, can be understood following the way Tellenbach conceives the issue: the category of the situative.

As already noted, Tellenbach (1974/1975, p. 174) critically discusses Jaspers' concept of situation, taking distances from both the concept ("the way the surrounding environment is discharged on the single person") and the idea of a will of the individual ("the possibility to indicate to the surrounding environment the way it must present itself"). Tellenbach's conceptualization is different and is expressed clearly: "We conceive the situative as that primordial state in which the single and what surrounds him in his inner world are still unite"; the situative is "always a section of the I-world context".

He considers Pauleikhoff's position by starting from Jaspers and Lange's studies on how some situations can lead to endogenous depression by request of inner structural adjustment, which is unachievable. Something unachievable that is more properly "not-accessible" and leads to a substantial impossibility of adjustment. In this definition, according to all the mentioned authors we find the element of the loss of reactivity to the situation of the subject, and also the indifference experienced by the person in the premorbid phase.

Tellenbach (1974/1975, p. 176) goes on explaining that the reason for such an inaccessibility to the adjustment and the failure of the structural readjustment can be understood looking at the situation as "continuous reference of the single to the world". In this way, the single can give his own "positional value" to the happening. For the melancholic, the inability to adjust is in itself the specific situation when it solicits the basic orderliness to which the subject's existence is constitutionally anchored. Hence, the situation always concurs to the modification of the primordial person-world relationship.

The concept of the situative is completed by the verb "to situate": the person "situates" its own situation, that means he unceasingly builds, models and shapes its own world in its own way. By transforming the situation in the operation of situating, we perform a fundamental heuristic act allowing us to understand that the individual is the maker of his own world, although he has only a partial will power. It is the anthropological characteristics of the person the action that concurs to situate the subject in its world.

Tellenbach firstly, then his pupil Kraus, both clearly defined the traits of the Typus, i.e. the fundamentals of the personality structure of the pre-melancholic person. Orderliness, conscientiousness, ipernomia/heteronomia, intolerance to the ambiguity, all characterize

the Da-Sein of the Typus and represent the pathogenic elements for the onset of the psychotic depression. They are constitutive traits which are fundamental and distinguishing; they characterize the way of being in the world and explain the vulnerability of the person towards depression (Ambrosini & Stanghellini, 2011). They are an array of attitudes, customs, beliefs and values that we call together personality, and that pervasively influence the way the being and the doing of the individual is constituted. In this description we detach ourselves from the common psychiatric description (e.g. Perugi et al., 2012) of the premorbid or vulnerable personality, intended as mild expression of the mood disorder or as something influencing the presentation of symptomatic traits, or even as the temperamental basis of vulnerability.

Tellenbach explains that the excessive attachment to values like orderliness and conscientiousness influences the person exposed to those life events in front of which adjustment is impossible, as the structural remodulation of the identity basis becomes impossible. Hence the situation acquires a "specific" connotation, and stimulates the person towards that form of pathological adaptation, which is still pre-morbid, characterized by the *includence* and *remanence* constellations.

What is meant by orderliness is the condition of being constantly attached to values like an order of stability and harmony in interpersonal relationships, always maintained free from possible conflicts. By conscientiousness is intended the absolute necessity to prevent the experience of guilt, both as subjective feeling and as possible attribution of a judgment from the outside: the Typus constantly lives in search of the others' satisfactions and expectations.

Accordingly, the category of the situative refers to a certain way of being in the world of a person rigidly attached to its own categories of values, in the context of general human situation. The situative is completed in the dynamic showing the adaptation to limit situations and its development in the melancholic endokinesis. Once faced in front of specific situations implying an incapacity to adjust, the melancholic type perceives them as a threat to the existence in its entirety. It is in this shift that we can grasp, in terms of narrative identity of oneself, the inability of the Typus to maintain or find an equilibrium between the "being itself" and the "being the same" (Stanghellini, 2006). Here we find the two polarities of a continuum, the two extremes between which our identity is usually situated as an intermediate balance.

The rigidity of the Typus' personal identity and his values' world is related to an overidentification with the role identity, i.e. with that part that sustains the personal identity at a conventional and social level. In this way, what lacks is an equilibrium in the dialectic of narrative identity, as the philosopher Ricoeur (1990/1993) calls it. In the mature personality the narrative identity arises from a constant tension between two poles, i.e. the permanence of an image in time, the "being the same", at one side, and the "being him/herself" at the other side. In turn, these last polar elements are continuously construed in dialogue, a dialogue between the nuclearity of the Self and the figure of the Other.

The defectivity of the Self is substantiated in a rigid anchoring to the role identity, to the obligation of always "being the same Self".

It becomes impossible to find itself completed in the relationship with the fellow man, which on the contrary is seen as a "dangerous source of nullification" (Stanghellini,2006). Hence, the construction of a full narrative identity is hampered, the tragedy being the obligation of being always and only the same Self, and once this identity is threatened, the crisis is in march. A crisis that will present those phenomena described by Tellenbach as those prodromes of the pre-melancholic despair that he will name "constellations".

Indeed, in the category of the situative he describes the two constellations of the includence and the remanence. To remain confined within boundaries progressively narrowing (includence) and to remain behind, to be late regarding itself and its own obligations (remanence) are those specific constellations that in the Typus concur to the feeling of despair. They converge in producing the typical feeling of anguish and unbearable self-contradiction while trying to adapt to the "specific situation". It is this self-contradiction, experienced as guilt, that immediately precedes the melancholic despair.

CONCLUSIONS

In psychopathology, Tellebach's concept of the situative substantially concurs in defining a distance between reactive adjustments at one side, and endogenous adaptations on the other side.

It gives substance and relevance to the concept of endogenous, which circumscribes a psychic causal field that is well differentiated from the other fields: i.e. the exogenous and the somatic ones.

The concept of situative aids in the construction of bridges of hermeneutic connection between personality, vulnerability, and clinical practice.

Having order and being in order are apodictic sentences for the Typus, they are essential in its existence. In nuce, they represent the insufficient identity of the pre-melancholic person (Kraus, 2010). They are forms through which it is disclosed the modality of the individual to enter in relationship with its own world, and through which its adaptive competency in relational life is measured. The situative specifies this competency and gives reason of the vulnerability of the person towards depression whenever its identity is threatened at its basis.

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